

# Hearings on proposed Santolina master plan to start this week

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Bernalillo County commissioners this week will confront a decision that could shape growth in the area for decades to come.

They will begin hearings Wednesday afternoon on the largest master plan ever considered by the county – covering almost 22 square miles on the far West Side. The commission has dedicated all of the next day, Thursday, to considering the plan, too.

And it isn't clear whether even that will be enough time to reach a decision on the Santolina Master Plan, as it's called.

Both supporters and opponents of the plan have appealed a lower-level decision that recommended approval of the plan. Opponents want it denied, while supporters say the decision imposed inappropriate conditions on the project.

### Learn more and participate

The County Commission is scheduled to meet at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday and continue the hearing at 9 a.m. the next day. The meetings are in the Vince Griego Chambers of the city-county Government Center, One Civic Plaza NW. Land-use documents, appeals and other information are available at [www.bernco.gov/santolina](http://www.bernco.gov/santolina). People can sign up to speak or send in comments by visiting the "Talk to us" page at [www.bernco.gov/talktous](http://www.bernco.gov/talktous).

Altogether, there are five appeals from various groups, centering on the master plan and a related zoning change.

Public comment and consideration of the appeals begins Wednesday.

The debate has kicked off something resembling a political campaign. Opponents have aired radio advertisements and supporters have a website that offers a point-by-point rebuttal to criticisms.

The master plan decision will have "a huge impact on the future of the community," County Commission Chairwoman Maggie Hart Stebbins said. "How growth progresses over the next half century will be influenced by what happens with Santolina."

Hart Stebbins said she is still considering the record in the case and isn't ready to announce her position.

### Pros and cons

Supporters say approval of the master plan will ensure smart, orderly development. It also will make it easier to attract employers to the West Side, with the goal of making Santolina a "self-sufficient" community where people can live and work, they say.

The master plan calls for a broad mix of uses organized into residential village centers. At total build-out over the next 40 to 50 years, the area could have about 38,000 homes.

The plan also must comply with policies intended to ensure it comes at "no net cost to Bernalillo County," meaning revenue from the development would have to cover the cost of providing services.

John P. Salazar, an attorney for Western Albuquerque Land Holdings, which owns the property, said the existing zoning already allows one home per acre, or 13,851 homes in all. But the master plan would allow better development, with thousands of acres dedicated to employers and job creation, he said.

"At the end of the day," he said, "it's much better to have development that is planned over a period of time, as



opposed to helter-skelter development that just locates without any advance planning and opportunities to have comprehensive attention to the kind of detail developments require.”

Opponents say the project is simply too big and too far away from Albuquerque’s core. It would add to the strain on the local water supply and draw taxpayer resources away from the built-out parts of the city, they say.

The plan also underestimates the costs of providing services and overstates revenue, opponents argue.

Other concerns include the proposal’s impact on West Side sand dunes and traffic congestion.

“It’s about the future of our city and the direction of our investment – whether we’re choosing to reconstruct and revitalize our city’s core or whether we’re going to allow our limited resources to go to a development like this on the fringe,” said Javier Benavidez, executive director of the SouthWest Organizing Project, which opposes the plan.

The Santolina property lies southwest of Interstate 40 and 118th Street. It now has an agricultural zoning that allows for low-density, rural residential development.

The property had once been owned by Westland Development, the corporate successor to the Atrisco Land Grant, given by Spain to settlers in the New World.

### **Setting conditions**

The commission may face decisions beyond just whether to approve or deny the master plan. If the commissioners approve it, they will have to consider what conditions to impose.

In December, the County Planning Commission recommended that a future development agreement state explicitly that the county “is not and never will be financially obligated” to pay any net costs for future roadways, trails and other infrastructure within Santolina’s boundaries.

They also want the development agreement to ensure Santolina won’t use more than about 4.7 billion gallons of water a year.

The development team objects to those conditions, among others. The financial condition isn’t appropriate for a land-use decision and should be addressed instead in the development agreement itself.

The water requirement, too, “is more properly dealt with” in a development agreement with the local Water Utility Authority.

In a letter to the county last year, the water authority said it’s “capable” of serving Santolina, though the service would be contingent on the development meeting certain requirements.